

THE
NATURE and IMPORTANCE
OF *h'd with pres*
CHRISTIAN LOVE,
CONSIDERED IN A
CIRCULAR LETTER
FROM THE
BAPTIST MINISTERS and MESSENGERS

Assembled at ST. ALBAN's, in *Hertfordshire*,

June 10, 11, and 12, 1783:

Containing the important Doctrines of three equal Persons in the Godhead, eternal and personal Election, original Sin, particular Redemption, free Justification by the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness, efficacious Grace in Regeneration, the final Perseverance of the Saints, and the Independency or Congregational Order of the Churches of Christ violable.

To the several Churches they represent, or have received Letters from, meeting at Sutton - Ashfield, Nottingham, Sheephead, Leicester, Sutton-in-the-Elms, Arnsby, Foxton, Clipston, Oakham, Soham, Kettering, Walgrave, Northampton, Road, Olney, and St. Alban's; also many other Churches, not yet in the Association, who, notwithstanding, countenance it by the Attendance of their Ministers, and many of their Members.

Dear Brethren,

By the good hand of our God upon us, we were conducted in safety to, and met at the place and time appointed, and were favoured with a pleasant and profitable interview with each other. After solemnly beseeching Almighty God for assistance and success, we heard the letters read from the several churches, and took an account of their contents. We rejoice, brethren, that your churches are continued, and that there are among them a steady and firm attachment to the precious truths of the glorious gospel of the blessed God, a regard for the solemn and holy institutions of our almighty and adorable redeemer, and the discipline of his house; and that there are any tokens of Jehovah's presence in the midst of them. We would also mourn with you, brethren, on account of coldness and indifferency manifested by some, and the backslidings of others, among you; and desire to unite with you in addressing the Lord at
A the

the throne of his grace, for the dew of his divine influences to fall upon you, *that ye may grow as the lilly, and cast forth your roots as Lebanon; and that your beauty may be as the olive tree, and your scent be as the wine of Lebanon.*

We feel for those churches which are destitute of under-shepherds to feed, to guide, and to comfort them; and would earnestly pray, that the great and good shepherd would, in his own time and way, send them pastors after his own heart, who may feed them with knowledge and understanding. We would recommend to them, frequently to consult together with coolness of temper, waiting on the Lord for direction, observing the leadings of his providence, not to be hasty, but cordially to receive and encourage such who have manifested soundness of judgment in doctrine, purity of morals, prudence in conduct, and faithfulness in service:—from the labours of such, real advantages, by the blessing of God, may reasonably be expected.

We can assure you, brethren, with sincerity, that we do not mean, by our associating ourselves together, to infringe on any of your liberties, nor to attempt to exercise any dominion over your faith and conscience; but we trust our only aim is, to be serviceable to promote the glory of God, the welfare of immortal souls, and the interest of your churches; and if these ends may be answered, we shall have the utmost of our wishes accomplished.

Your churches, brethren, are voluntary societies, founded upon the truly primitive plan, according to which the first christian churches were formed, by the direction of Christ given to his holy apostles, and by their writings conveyed to us: so that ye may be said to be *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone, Eph. ii. 20. to whom comin., as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious: ye also as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. 1 Pet. ii. 4, 5.* Such is the nature and constitution of your churches, brethren, as renders them fit societies for answering all the purposes of social religion, and for promoting the real happiness of individuals. The privileges which you enjoy are many and great, and the duties which are required of you are reasonable and just. *The commands of Christ are not grievous; his yoke is easy, and his burden light. 1 John v. 3. Matt. xi. 30.*

The design of our Circular Letter is to remind you of your privileges and duties, to animate and encourage you to *press on toward the mark; for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus; and that ye may have your conversation as becometh the gospel of Christ, that ye may stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel. Phil. iii. 14. i. 27. That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God, and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thes. i. 12.*

In our former letters we have attempted to explain many of the great truths of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, and have recommended and enforced many religious duties. The subject we now propose is that of CHRISTIAN LOVE, which we will endeavour to explain and enforce; and *this we pray that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge, and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere, and without offence, till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits*

fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God. Phil. i. 9, 10, 11.

Love is that affection of the mind, by which the heart moves toward, cleaves unto, and centers in, some apparent good, with delight and complacency. Its operations may be various, according to the state which the object may be apprehended to be in. As for instance, if the object be considered as being at a distance, then love operates in a way of longing desire for the possession and enjoyment of it;—if there be a probability of enjoyment, then it operates in a way of hope;—if it be considered as promising some good, then love operates in a way of confidence;—if there be no probability of enjoyment, then it operates in a way of anxiety, grief, and despair;—if the object be present, then love operates in a way of delight or complacency and satisfaction.

Now if this affection be influenced by the grace of God, and the power of gospel truths, it will move the heart toward, and cause the soul to cleave unto, and center in, the one-eternal and immutable Jehovah, as the supreme object of it; and that on account of his eternal and immutable excellencies, and his suitableness to render his intelligent creatures happy. The streams of his beneficence may serve to direct your thoughts and affections to him, but his infinite dignity and greatness, glory and excellency, are to be considered as the primary ground of disinterested affection for him. The infinite glory of his natural and moral perfections being discovered in his works and his word, especially as they are most illustriously displayed in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, *in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* Colos. ii. 9. *Who is the brightness of his father's glory, and the express image of his person.* Heb. i. 3. *So that he who hath seen the son, hath seen the father also,* John xiv. 9. and whoever sees the glories of God in the person of Christ cannot be without some affection for him, as he is the best good, and the only true source of all real happiness.

True genuine love for God may be distinguished by the various expressions of it in the mind, or as it is the chief animating spring of all other right affections in the heart, such as *longing desires* after the enjoyment of him as the best, the chief good,—*hope*, or waiting with expectation for his presence and blessing,—*an humble confidence* in his promise,—*a regard* for his authority,—*a filial fear* of offending him,—*an abhorrence of sin* as being contrary to his infinite holiness,—*a zeal* for his honour,—*grief* and anxiety on account of his absence,—and *delight, complacency and satisfaction* in the enjoyment of his presence. These spring from true love, and may be considered as good evidences of its existence in the soul; and love to God is a good evidence of interest in his special and everlasting love, for *we love him because he first loved us.* 1 John iv. 19.

As ye, brethren, are taught by the sacred oracles of eternal truth, to love God superlatively above all other objects whatsoever, so ye are taught by the same word, to love subordinately your neighbours as yourselves. Matt. xxii. 39. *Yea, to love your enemies; to bless them that curse you, to do good to them that hate you, and to pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.* Matt. v. 44. This affection is to be expressed not only by words, but by doing good both to the souls and bodies of men; seeking their temporal and eternal welfare; sympathizing with them in their distress; relieving their necessities; bearing with their infirmities;

firmities; exercising forgiveness towards them; and giving them good counsel and advice in cases of difficulty;—and more especially ye are taught to love them who bear the image of your heavenly Father, who are of one family, partakers of the same grace, enjoying the same privileges, travelling together in one and the same way, going to one home, to dwell together for ever. Hence saith Christ to his disciples, this is my commandment that ye love one another, as I have loved you. John xv. 12--17. And the apostle Peter, addressing believers, exhorts them to love one another with a pure heart fervently. 1 Pet. i. 22. Again, in Heb. xiii. 1. you may find this exhortation, *Let brotherly love continue*. Which love should be expressed by Christians one towards another, by shewing a readiness to assemble together, regularly to attend upon the worship of God, and the ordinances of Jesus Christ, by sympathizing with the afflicted in their distresses, by cheerfully contributing for the relief of the necessities of the poor, bearing with the infirmities of the weak, tenderly admonishing when necessary, praying with and for one another, and so seeking the welfare and happiness of each other.

And now, brethren, suffer a word of exhortation—We would endeavour to enforce this great duty of Christian Love upon you, by these following motives, which are so many grounds and reasons why ye should endeavour, by the grace of God, to manifest in your lives this amiable temper, which will make you most like unto God your heavenly Father. *God is love*. 1 John iv. 16. Do ye profess yourselves to be the children of God? Ye are to be *followers*, that is, imitators of *him*, as such. Eph. v. 1. Are ye, brethren, of one family, partakers of the same grace, interested in one and the same covenant, united to one head, enjoying the same blessings, privileges, and promises; travelling in one way, going to one home, expecting the same inheritance, and to live together in love to all eternity?—See then that ye fall not out by the way, *but love as brethren*; shew forth this heavenly temper, and testify to all about you that ye love God and one another. Remember, brethren, that God has testified his love for you by an infinite number of benefits, even before you had any affection for him. His love is eternal and immutable, and the instances of it are great and wonderful; such as his chusing you in Christ unto salvation and eternal life, blessing you with all spiritual blessings, giving his Son to die for you when ye were enemies, drawing you to himself by his loving kindness and with tender mercies, bestowing the privileges of the gospel on you, and giving you a lively hope of glory. Therefore, brethren, let not your love be in word, neither in tongue only, but in *deed* and in *truth*.—1 John iii. 18. Then will ye be like your heavenly Father, and testify to others that ye are the children of the living God.

Further, this will make you most like unto Jesus Christ, our amiable pattern and elder brother: his love *passeth knowledge*. Eph. iii. 19. How great are the instances of it! such as his early engaging with his Father by covenant on your behalf, his readiness to take on him your nature in the fulness of time, his cheerful obedience in your stead, his freely giving up himself to sufferings and to death, as your substitute and surety, paying your debt, redeeming your life from destruction, and crowning you with loving kindness and tender mercies; interceding for you in heaven, bestowing his grace and righteousness on you, watching over you as the good shepherd, and preparing places for you in his *Father's house*, where *are many mansions*; promising to come and to *receive you to himself*, that
where

where he is there ye may be also. And in that short life which he spent in this world, he fully displayed all the beauties of this heavenly temper, by continually going about doing good to the souls and bodies of men. Would ye be like him? go and do likewise: and let it be seen by those about you, that ye are his disciples, by *loving one another*. John xiii. 35.

Furthermore, brethren, remember that love is the grand enlivening spring of all other heavenly and gracious affections. "Love is the brightest of the train, and strengthens all the rest." Watts.—Love is the sum and substance, the very life and soul of the christian religion: without love, all knowledge, gifts, faith, and works, would be as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal, and would profit nothing. See 1 Cor. xiii. 1, 2, 3. It contains the whole doctrine of the law and the prophets. Matt. xxii. 37--40. Rom. xiii. 8--10. Gal. v. 14. Therefore, brethren, we beseech you, that by love ye serve one another: by doing which you will best hold forth the word of life in the different situations of life you are in, and the different characters and relations you sustain;—and hereby you will best adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things, and give full proof of the reality, importance, and utility of the doctrines of christianity, and the sincerity of your profession of them: therefore *let your love be without dissimulation; abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good; be kindly affectioned one to another; with brotherly love, in honour, preferring one another*. Rom. xii. 9, 10.

Again, brethren, we would remind you that love will make duties easy, pleatant, delightful, and profitable. "'Tis love that makes our chearful feet, in swift obedience move." Watts.—It expands the mind, enlarges the heart, and enlivens all the powers of the soul; so that the christian, in the exercise of it, runs in the way of God's commandments with pleasure and joy, and performs the duties of religion, such as preaching and hearing of the word of God, prayer, attendance on divine ordinances, sympathizing with the poor and afflicted in their distresses, bearing with the infirmities of the weak, and exercising forgiveness, with chearfulness; all which duties would be either wholly neglected, or attended to with cold indifferency, yea, would be burdensome without love. But when love prevails in the heart, they will neither be grievous nor burdensome. The excellent properties of charity (by which is meant love) as set forth in 1 Cor. xiii. 4, 5, 6, 7, fully confirm the above observations, and clearly shew the true nature, utility, and great importance of it. *It suffereth long and is kind, it envieth not, it vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*. Therefore we beseech you, brethren, to *consider one another, to provoke unto love and good works*. Heb. x. 24.

Again, brethren, we would have you remember, that love is necessary for the well-being, the peace, the prosperity, and safety of all your churches. It is like the cement of a building; that which unites and keeps together the several parts of it, and strengthens the whole. When the hearts of church members are knit together in love, they have no need to be afraid, though an host of enemies should encamp against them: such societies are *beautiful as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, and terrible as an army with banners*. Sol. Song, vi. 4. *Peace will be within their walls, and prosperity in all their palaces*. They are not so liable to be divided,

divided, nor are their walls to be easily broken down. But on the contrary, when love is decayed and gone, and animosities, contentions, divisions, and every evil work take place; desolation, if not a total destruction, is to be feared. As when the cement of a building is gone, desolation and destruction soon follow. Take away love, and the most amiable society would be either a den of dragons, venting nothing but their poisonous dispositions; or at best, all the delightful feelings of true friendship must subside, and all real union be dissolved. It is not only of inexpressible use, but absolutely necessary: it is the sinews which unite the members of Christ's body (the church) together; the blood which pervades every part, and is the life of the whole. Without it there may be a confederacy, but not a church of Christ. And therefore, brethren, be much concerned to preserve and encourage love among yourselves. *Live in love, and the God of love and peace will be with you, and bless you with peace and prosperity.*

Bear with us, brethren, while we further press you to attend to this noble duty, and recommend to you this excellent grace of love, as it is essential to the happiness of the heavenly world. " 'Tis love that makes heaven sweet: there we shall have our fill of joy, because there we shall have our fill of love."* There it will be in its greatest and highest degree of perfection: faith will be changed into sight, and hope into enjoyment; but love will endure for ever—it *never faileth*. 1 Cor. xiii. 8. " This is the grace that lives and sings, when faith and hope shall cease: 'tis this shall strike our joyful strings, in the sweet realms of bliss." Watts. No discord will be in heaven; all will be harmony, peace, and love; and that for ever. Is it then of such vast importance in the christian religion, as to be essentially necessary to real happiness in this world and that which is to come? then let it be your earnest endeavour, brethren, to *abound* in this grace also.

To conclude,—is there not much cause for lamentation, mourning, and humiliation before God, on account of the many defects in our love? May the Lord pardon our offences, renew our hearts, and give us a spirit of love, and of a sound mind.

And now, brethren, *we commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us; unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

Signed on behalf of the brethren, by

JOHN GILL, Moderator.

* Mr. Richard Alleine's *Heavens opened, or a Discovery of the Riches of God's Covenant of Grace*, being the 3d part of *Vindiciæ Pietatis*, chap. xiii. from p. 135 to 157, contains some admirable and striking thoughts on love to God.—For some account of the excellent author of this valuable and evangelical book, who was ejected from Batcombe, in Somersetshire, see *Palmer's Nonconformist's Memorial*, vol. ii. p. 345.

B R E V I A T E S.

Tuesday evening we met at the usual hour, and after spending some time in prayer, a moderator was chosen, the letters from the churches were read, and minutes taken of their contents, and the opportunity concluded with prayer.

Wednesday morning about six, we met for prayer; seven brethren engaged in the opportunity. The public meeting began about ten, and was well attended;—brother Fuller, late of Soham, but now of Kettering, prayed—after which brother Ryland, sen. of Northampton, gave some account of the design of the association, and prayed—brother Ryland, jun. then preached from Isaiah xliii. 10. *Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord*—brother Evans, late of Foston, prayed—and brother Hall, sen. of Arnsby, preached from 1 Cor. xvi. 22. *If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maranatha*—brother Guy, of Sheephead, concluded by prayer. Between five and six in the evening we met again—brother Sutclif, of Olney, prayed—Dr. Stennett preached from 1 John iii. 14. *We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren*; the Dr. concluded in prayer.

Thursday morning about seven we met for prayer, and to communicate to each other some account of our experiences as ministers during the course of the past year, and to finish the business of the association; between eleven and twelve, the association was concluded with prayer by the moderator. Twenty ministers were engaged in the several opportunities.

State of the churches since the last association:

Added on a profession of faith and experience	-	-	-	-	-	24
By letter of recommendation	-	-	-	-	-	1
						25
Dead	-	-	-	-	-	10
Dismissed	-	-	-	-	-	6
Excluded	-	-	-	-	-	7
						32
Decrease	-	-	-	-	-	7

N. B. The next association to be held at Nottingham, in the Whitfun week; to meet on Tuesday evening at the usual hour. Brother Sutclif, of Olney, and brother Ryland, sen. of Northampton, to preach; and in case of failure, brother Gill, of St. Alban's, and brother Fuller, of Kettering.—** Put up at the Flying-Horse.

An Account of the ASSOCIATION FUND.

As many valuable ends are answered to the ministers and churches by uniting in an associate connection, it was several years ago thought, at one of our associations, that those ends might be increased by the institution of an *association fund*, which every church might annually contribute to in proportion to their ability, as well as generous individuals who might be disposed to further the design.

This design was accordingly communicated to the churches, who several of them favoured it. From thence we attempted to carry it into execution. Hitherto, we must own, it has been exceedingly weak; yet, though in its infancy, its beneficial nature has been experienced by several who are ready to make their grateful acknowledgments to their kind benefactors. True, its designs as yet have only been accomplished in a contracted manner; but we hope for the pleasure of seeing its increasing utility, when generally supported by our christian friends. Some of our churches, it becomes us to acknowledge, have cheerfully encouraged it; and others, we are willing to think, would be ready to do so, were they but better acquainted with its nature and design. To this end it has been thought proper to print the outlines of the plan: accordingly we here lay before you its nature and principal ends.

I. It is proposed to our respective churches and congregations to contribute once a year a small sum, which shall be deposited in the hands of a treasurer, chosen by the ministers and messengers of the associate churches.

N. B. Mr. Beeby Wallis, of Kettering, has been chosen treasurer.

II. The principal particular objects we have in view are such as follow:

1. To give assistance to any new interest that may be in a weak condition.
2. To

2. To encourage village preaching, for the propagation of the gospel in places distant from any stated means of grace.

3. To bear the expences of any of our ministers, who may be deputed to make an occasional visit to any of our associate churches, whose state of distant situation may require it.

4. To afford some degree of relief to any of our ministers who may be brought into straits by afflictive dispensations of providence.

5. To assist in repairing any place of worship among us, where a general collection among the churches may not be needful.

6. To assist in supplying any of our distant destitute churches, who may be unable to pay the whole expences of supplies on account of such distance.

7. To assist some of our poor churches in defraying the expences of their ministers' journey to the association.

8. In case the sale of the association letters at any time should not be equal to the charge of printing, the remainder may be paid out of this fund.

III. Any number of ministers (not under three) who are pastors of churches contributing to the support of this fund, when assembled at any quarterly meeting, shall be empowered as a committee to take into consideration any case which may be proposed, and to draw on the treasurer for such a sum as they shall judge convenient, not exceeding two guineas at a time to any one case.

IV. The treasurer shall keep a regular account of all the transactions relative to this fund; which account shall be produced and examined at every association, and being approved, shall be signed by the moderator.

V. The surplus of profits at any time arising from the sale of the association letters shall go towards the support of this fund.

VI. Such churches who do not contribute to this fund are not to expect any assistance from it.

And now, brethren and friends, is not this a plan that is well worthy of your encouragement? We wish to recommend nothing but what upon just grounds deserves your hearty approbation. We beg you to give it a serious consideration. Do not lay it aside as soon as read, and never think of it again. Weigh the matter closely. If, upon reflection, you think it merits attention, then give it encouragement according to your ability. Remember you should be ready to *every* good work. (Tit. iii. 1.) If this is not one, let it not be supported; if it is, let it not be neglected.—Brethren! *be not weary in well doing: in due season ye shall reap if ye faint not.* Be always abounding in the work of the Lord. You know your labour is not in vain in the Lord. Though your goodness cannot extend to the great Jehovah, or benefit him, yet it may the saints that are in the earth, the excellent in whom is all your delight. We have addressed you in the letter now in your hand on the endearing subject of *love*; a subject which if you cordially imbibe, little more need be said on this annexed plan. Allow us to conclude with the words of the apostle of the Gentiles, when stimulating the Corinthians to a similar work, *We speak not by commandment, but by the occasion of the forwardness of others,* AND TO PROVE THE SINCERITY OF YOUR LOVE,